All kinds of jobs increasingly depend on STEM skills

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Take a guess at the percentage of future jobs that will require science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) skills. If you said “80 percent,” you were right.

Major New Mexico employers, including Los Alamos National Laboratory, educational leaders and legislators are attempting to come to terms with this prediction and a related gap in STEM skills in New Mexico students.

Here are two more intriguing questions:

1. What is the single strongest predictor of long-term academic success across all subjects?

1. What is the percentage of New Mexico’s after-school programs that offer STEM instruction?

If you responded “math” to the first question and “37 percent” to the second, you were correct again.

But 37 percent for New Mexico’s after-school STEM offerings is a disappointingly low number compared with the 69 percent of STEM-savvy after-school programs across the U.S.

The STEM Action Team

In late 2012 a STEM education summit in Santa Fe brought together a wide range of New Mexican professionals interested in STEM education. The STEM participants addressed three main goals:

- Cultivate top-notch, inspiring K-12 math and science teachers.
- Make STEM education more relevant, exciting and rigorous in the K-12 classroom.
- Recruit and retain more STEM college students.

To ensure progress toward the goals, a STEM Action Team was formed and is continuing its work under the guidance of New Mexico First, a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan group devoted to building consensus between groups and inspiring legislative action in New Mexico.

When members of the STEM Action Team recently discussed the state of STEM education with the New Mexico Legislative Education Study Committee, they provided research-based information and recommendations for increasing STEM proficiency in New Mexico’s schools.

The action team noted, for example, that K-12 STEM education tends to be underfunded because lawmakers often place a heavy emphasis on early literacy at the expense of math and science. Research findings, however, have found that school-entry math knowledge actually predicts later literacy skills.

“By 2020, the STEM Action Team would like to see the number of New Mexican students measurably proficient in math and science increased by 25 percent,” said New Mexico First president Heather Balas. “Other measurable goals the team is striving for include increasing the number of college students in STEM fields, including the health professions, by 25 percent; graduating 1,000 new teachers in science and math; and supporting and retaining existing STEM teachers.”

For additional information about the STEM Action Team, go to the New Mexico First *website or email New Mexico First (info@nmfirst.org).*

To learn more about the STEM Action Team’s collaboration with Los Alamos National Laboratory and other science and industry partners, see the Major New Mexico employers sign STEM education proclamation story in Community Connections’ *November 2014 issue.*

Community Connections features news and opportunities that grow out of the Laboratory’s Good Neighbor Pledge: “To partner with our neighbors on strengthening math and science learning, diversifying the economy and expanding community giving in northern New Mexico.”